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## Billboard's 2018 Country Power Players List Revealed: The Industry's Most Influential

**SALLY WILLIAMS, 46**

*Senior vp programming and artist relations, Opry Entertainment; gm, Grand Ole Opry*  
*Protective of the Grand Ole Opry's 93-year-old history but dedicated to ensuring its future, Sally Williams welcomes both veterans and country's cutting edge -- like Devin Dawson and Ashley McBryde -- to the Nashville landmark's storied stage.*



From left: Opry members Janson, Joe Don Rooney and LeVox of Rascal Flatts; Williams; and Jay DeMarcus of Rascal Flatts (also a member) photographed on May 8, 2018 at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville.

As guardian of the Grand Ole Opry's illustrious 93-year-old legacy, Williams points to 2018 Opry membership invitations extended to Chris Janson, 32, and Bobby Bare, 83, as a reflection of the institution's scope. "It's important to us to represent the full range of country artists," says Williams, who notes that Ashley McBryde's bluesy Southern rock, Lukas Nelson's cowboy surf and Devin Dawson's soulful country have all recently made Opry stage debuts. "We've got an amazing past," adds Williams, "but our eye is also on the future."

Williams is also working to impart the Opry's sensibility beyond Nashville. Since last October, Opry Entertainment has opened three offshoot locations: Ole Red Nashville and Oklahoma's Ole Red Tishomingo, a pair of upscale honky-tonks with Opry member and partner Blake Shelton, and Opry City Stage, a Times Square satellite in New York. As Williams explains, "I want to tie all this together in a way that engages more with the artistic community."

**Biggest Country Music Story Of The Past Year:** "Sadly, it was the Route 91 tragedy, but there were positive stories as well. Vince Gill became an Eagle. Garth Brooks concluded the biggest tour ever by a solo artist. The Mother Church of Country Music -- the Ryman Auditorium -- celebrated its 125th anniversary, including the first yearlong residency featuring Little Big Town."

**Why Country Artists Avoid Politics Today:** "There has never been a time when all country music was political. Hank Williams' music wasn't overtly political, nor was the music of Patsy Cline. On the other hand, Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn tackled social and political issues, alienating radio stations and potential fans in the process. These days, sped and amplified by the immediacy of the internet, reactions to differing opinions can be ferocious. Tolerance and respect for other views are easily lost. Kudos to artists who are compelled to speak their minds on controversial issues. But who can blame any artist who doesn't?"

**Rascal Flatts Frontman Gary LeVox On Williams:** "Sally has always been a powerhouse within our industry. It has been a privilege to work with her over the years and to see such a strong woman leading the charge at the Opry now, which has always been a special place for us. It's exciting to see her continue to excel." -- CAMILLE DODERO